

Vietnam Research Elective: Final Paper  
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In November of 1970, a small U.S. special operations force executed an intricately planned raid into a small compound next to the village of Son Tay, North Vietnam. The mission proceeded quickly and the landing force suffered no significant casualties despite encountering and defeating an enemy element twice their number. The raiders were on orders to recover U.S. POWs reportedly housed in the compound. To their utter surprise and disappointment, however, the camp held no prisoners. The Son Tay Raid has been a much discussed military operation every since. On the one hand it has been examined as an important example of joint force operations, since the team suffered no significant setbacks on the ground (one helicopter did accidentally land short of the objective, however built-in contingency plans quickly mitigated this error). On the other hand the fact that no POWs were present has led to much criticism of the intelligence behind the raid as well as the handling of that intelligence by the raid's military and political sponsors in Washington. But this criticism is in fact not supported by the evidence. Indeed, an examination of the major literature on the raid suggests that this criticism is wholly unwarranted. It reveals (1) gross mischaracterizations of the role of intelligence in the final days leading up to the operation (2) gross mischaracterizations of the larger decision making process this intelligence tried to support. These two points will be explored in the following paragraphs. A third portion of this paper will offer a brief rebuttal to a 2005 *Parameters* essay on the Son Tay raid that unfortunately exemplifies much of the faulty analysis at issue here.

Upon hearing the details and outcome of the Son Tay Raid, the Washington press corps was quick to characterize the mission as an intelligence failure. Since then, a number of raid participants have gone out of their way to dispute this assertion by highlighting the high quality of the *tactical* intelligence made available for the operation. For instance, signals intelligence had developed ingress routes that would not trip North Vietnamese air defenses.<sup>i</sup> This certainly

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helps in understanding part of the overall intelligence picture, but there is a larger question: why did the raid proceed against an empty objective? In May of that year, Air Force intelligence reported not only the existence of a POW camp west of Hanoi but indications on reconnaissance photos that the prisoners were signaling for a rescue mission launched on their behalf. By late summer, intelligence reporting reversed course and began showing a decrease in activity at the camp. But by this time planning and rehearsal for the raid were in full swing.<sup>ii</sup> Planning would not be deterred by ambiguous reports. But the issue eventually did come to a head in November when—with the raiders poised to attack within hours—DIA director Don Bennett briefed principles that a Vietnamese source was indicating that POWs had been moved to another camp, and that he found the source credible.<sup>iii</sup> U.S. Army Brig Gen Don Blackburn—the operation's lead military sponsor—found the intelligence ambiguous and recommended the mission continue. After a restless night rehashing the intelligence at DIA, Bennett finally reached the same conclusion and the raid went ahead as planned.

Since then, some writers have argued that this last minute intelligence should have caused a delay or a cancellation of the Son Tay mission. The first problem with this line of criticism is the overall intelligence picture was still decidedly ambiguous. Infra-red reconnaissance photographs still showed some sort of activity at the camp.<sup>iv</sup> This was enough to plant a seed of doubt as to whether or not the new intelligence was reliable. Another big problem, given the ambiguous nature of the intelligence, was that any debate about delaying the mission was happening within the context of the overwhelming operational considerations present hours prior to mission execution. The raiding party had been rehearsed for months in anticipation of this moment and its readiness might atrophy with any hesitation.<sup>v</sup> Concurrent with this months-long training effort were elaborate measures to maintain the utmost secrecy, and that too would be

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threatened if there was a delay.<sup>vi</sup> In other words, whereas the original intelligence reporting was a principle planning factor in May, by the time DIA director Bennett felt compelled to personally highlight indications that the POWs were gone, operational considerations were necessarily paramount and unyielding in the face of new reporting.

Authors such as David Isby argue that the raiders—positioned in Thailand—should have been informed of these contentious debates going on back in Washington. But for his part, the Son Tay in-theater mission commander, Brig Gen LeRoy Manor, was later thankful that he and his men were never informed of the DIA’s new source.<sup>vii</sup> He is thankful that his superiors, such as Blackburn, performed a filtering function on his behalf, digesting new information and freeing him to concentrate on the impending launch into hostile territory.

It is essential to understand that most intelligence analysis is inherently inconclusive. Operational leaders must consider this as intricate military plans begin to take shape. Blackburn was right to second guess the late hour DIA report, which should never have been presented as a major problem within the larger intelligence picture. The idea that the POW assessment was rock solid in May and had been harshly undercut since then was false. Even in May the intelligence was somewhat oversold. When the Air Force assessment was initially presented to the larger D.C. POW working group, significant aspects of the analysis were outright rejected by some members of the group.<sup>viii</sup> They felt that the interpretation of detailed messages within the photos was completely without merit. This is a point only briefly hinted at in Schemmer’s book and not examined at all by other authors. This detail demonstrates that from the very beginning the intelligence was incomplete. It was important only to the extent that it *informed* decisions. It did not make them.

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This idea that intelligence can complement but does not replace decision making leads into the second major point of this essay, which is that the military and political sponsors of the raid back in Washington have been unfairly characterized by several prominent reviews of the Son Tay Raid. The most common example of this in the literature is the frequent suggestion that the decisions they made were somehow corrupted by a consideration of ulterior motives.<sup>ix</sup> This idea is linked to the previous discussion of intelligence in that there is a feeling among these authors that the leadership in Washington rejected indications that the POWs were gone because they were ultimately guided by other aims. Among these secondary aims was—in the political realm—the message the raid would send to the North Vietnamese as well as the message the raid would send to the American people. More fundamentally, the politicians are portrayed as simply wanting to do *something*, even if there was no tangible result expected. Military leaders such as Blackburn, on the other hand, are portrayed as becoming so emotionally attached to the idea of dramatic military action for its own sake that they eventually refuse to entertain other courses of action. These are very serious charges and should not remain unchallenged. They imply that these decision makers would send American troops into an extremely dangerous place for self-serving reasons.

The first problem with such critiques of course is that they are based on the same faulty view of intelligence that was debunked in the first part of this essay. Leadership in Washington, such as Brig Gen Blackburn, Secretary Laird, and President Nixon, had every reason to believe that POWs could still be at Son Tay. But even if one feels that the last minute reporting should have been enough to sway leadership into recalling the raid, it should be enough to simply disagree with their interpretation on this specific point without extrapolating to some very cynical arguments as to why they let it proceed. There is simply no evidence offered by Son Tay

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experts to prove that White House or Pentagon leadership began to view American POWs as a secondary issue. To suggest otherwise represents a misreading of the complex and uncertain nature of the decision making process itself. It fails to properly empathize with the individuals who at that time were faced with difficult decisions and conflicting evidence. It confuses the many possible indirect and cascading effects of the operations (of which there were certainly many) with the original *reason* for the operation: American POWs.

And if decision makers did to an extent consider secondary effects as partial justification for the raid, that consideration was in retrospect justified. In fact, there has been much discussion about the benefits accrued from the raid despite the absence of the primary objective. Experts and participants seem to agree that the North Vietnamese viewed the Son Tay episode as a reason to consolidate POWs into two Hanoi locations, which had the effect of increasing POW morale and organization.<sup>x</sup> There is also speculation that the raid did communicate to the North Vietnamese that their rear areas were at risk of targeting by such methods.<sup>xi</sup> The exact advantages of this are hard to quantify, but this would have represented an important contribution to the overall settlement negotiations then ongoing. So if the raid's organizers did in fact consider potential ancillary benefits, they were correct in doing so.

There is a final important contextual factor that is missed by those who characterize Blackburn, Nixon, and others as making rash and unsupported decisions: the news of POW deaths in captivity. Concurrent with deliberations regarding the mission, two separate reports of POW deaths were received from North Vietnam (the deaths of 6 and 11 POWs respectively). It would be naïve to think that these leaders were not profoundly influenced by such reports. They were leading an effort to save other POWs from this fate and no doubt took the responsibility

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very personally. If they developed what one might call a bias for action—even in the face of some conflicting intelligence—it is understandable.

The third major argument to be made in this essay is simply to rebut the basis of a 2005 Parameters essay that unfortunately exemplifies the worst possible conclusions that can be drawn from the Son Tay scenario. The essay was written by Mark Amidon, a USAF officer then attending the Air War College. Amidon's thesis is that both military and civilian leadership of Son Tay suffered from “groupthink,” which led to their supposed mishandling of intelligence data and poor overall decision making. Unfortunately, in his effort to fit the events into a modern definition of groupthink, his analysis suffers from the very pitfalls articulated in the first two sections of this paper.

Perhaps the worst of Amidon's arguments revolves around a statement attributed to Blackburn regarding the raid's chances for success. Leading up to the raid, Henry Kissinger was briefed on the details and felt compelled to ask about the chances that the raid might fail and simply create more POWs. Blackburn responded that he felt there was a “95 to 97% assurance of success.”<sup>xii</sup> Amidon mistakenly interprets this exchange to mean that Blackburn—in addition to predicting the likelihood of a successful incursion—was also providing an assurance that POWs would be present. Amidon then derides this supposed near-guarantee by Blackburn as arbitrary, inaccurate, and not consistent with the trend in intelligence reporting. But the detailed account of this exchange provided in Ben Schemmer's authoritative account shows that Kissinger's question had nothing to do with the prisoners. The statement is presented, however, as a major piece of evidence that Blackburn and others had blinders on with regard to indications no POWs were present.<sup>xiii</sup> In reality, Blackburn was only articulating his confidence that the

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incursion would succeed without the loss of American troops. On that point he was, in retrospect, exactly right.

In exploring the psychology of the decision making in Washington, Amidon does his best to cast the principles in a poor light. He suggests repeatedly that President Nixon was not informed of the contentious intelligence emerging just before the raid.<sup>xiv</sup> He singles out Secretary of Defense Laird for what he characterizes as “selective reporting of intelligence.”<sup>xv</sup> The problem with this argument is that other—more authoritative—authors establish that President Nixon was well aware of the trends in intelligence reporting as well as the debate surrounding the DIA report in the final hours.<sup>xvi</sup> This is but one example of a larger effort in his essay to wrongly portray Laird, Blackburn and others as overt manipulators of information focused exclusively on achieving bureaucratic gain. His opinion is not at all supported by the official record, which shows plainly that all the individuals involved had a genuine hope that American POWs would be rescued.

It is unfortunate that such an important event in U.S. military history has suffered from some rather unfortunate analysis and assumptions regarding its supporting intelligence and key decisions made in the difficult hours before its execution. Even authors who otherwise provide extremely valuable accounts of the raid’s tactical planning and execution are in some cases purveyors of overly simplistic explanations of these elements. We should be thankful for such a thorough accounting of the actions of the raiders themselves, but the overall record would benefit greatly if the same care were taken in reviewing actions taken back in Washington. As the above analysis reveals, neither the role of intelligence nor the last minute decision making process in Washington has been fairly represented in some well known accounts of the raid. Intelligence is almost always an inherently ambiguous thing, and only serves to inform its consumers. And in

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this case the idea that an intricately planned and assembled force *must* be recalled based on intelligence trends is inaccurate. Likewise, the leadership ultimately responsible for the raid has been casually portrayed as a group guided primarily by personal and political considerations and not by the best interests of the POWs and raiders. As was discussed here, this view is not based in fact and therefore represents a totally undeserved slight against a group of people who devoted the better part of six months to this cause. The Son Tay Raid was a well considered and noble attempt to rescue Americans held in captivity. The mere possibility that POWs might be brought home was enough justification for it. Absolutely no evidence exists to suggest these fundamental motivations were willingly ignored or distorted by anyone. Accounts of Son Tay should unanimously reflect this.

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<sup>i</sup> Isby, p. 71, 79

<sup>ii</sup> Schemmer, p. 93-94, 96, 137

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 173

<sup>iv</sup> Gargus, p.261

<sup>v</sup> Manor interview, p. 179; Gargus, p. 260-261

<sup>vi</sup> Isby, p. 75

<sup>vii</sup> Manor interview, p. 179

<sup>viii</sup> Schemmer, p. 35

<sup>ix</sup> Vandenbroucke, 61-63; Haas, p. 331; Amidon, p. 127-128

<sup>x</sup> Isby, p. 85-86; Schemmer, p. 271; Gargus, p. 259; Vandenbroucke, p. 69; Haas, p. 332

<sup>xi</sup> Vandenbroucke, p. 69; Isby, p. 86

<sup>xii</sup> Schemmer, p. 139

<sup>xiii</sup> Amidon, p. 127

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p. 124, 126, 128

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid, p. 128

<sup>xvi</sup> Isby, p. 75; Vandenbroucke, p. 66; Schemmer, p. 180

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